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## Sorrow and Joy

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## SORROW AND JOY

### I.

The afternoon sky was vast; Carl squinted at the ground.

He was eating scrambled eggs. Liz burst in, drunk again, and made her way to the table where she lifted her cotton shift and displayed the tiny red heart tattooed on her ass. By accident, Carl knocked his eggs to the floor.

"Why?" he screamed. "Why this time!"

"You don't like it then get out!" Liz said, her face slipping into her vindictive smile. Her hair, the color of natural sponge, poked wildly into the air. "And you know what else?" She reached over jerkily, pulled the pen from his shirtpocket and, straining, snapped it before his face.

Carl clutched his leather briefcase tightly to his chest with both arms, like a jealous father, and scurried through the afternoon streets. Intense white daylight blinded him. *The cliff behind his cottage casts early evenings across the valley . . . he will wait beside the globe-shaped rock, wait while thinking of her lips, thick and red and moist, and uselessly scrape the ground with a stick . . . unless . . .*

Carl had not tried to stop her. He said nothing. Quietly, he lay on their small bed, his face to the wall. Occasionally, he dug at the plaster with his thumbnail and breathed lightly while he listened to the night breeze blowing briskly through the streets below. The blinds, with their broken slats, rustled pleasantly like the rattling of bamboo wind chimes. Later, when the night had become quiet sounds, Liz slipped into bed and pressed her warm body against his back.

"He was just a sailor. He wasn't any good. Sailors are crazy."

She lit cigarettes for them both, blew smoke out through her nose, and propped his head against her shoulder. There are times when principles count for nothing . . . all was silent, except the dull drumming of rain against the window. Gradually, the room filled with soft, gray light; upstairs, someone moved about, dropped heavy boots on the floor and flushed a toilet, but it was all in the distance, muffled and hazy, like the dim shoreline that was disappearing while Carl swam off, stroking wearily into sleep.

It had rained all night. Inside had still been dark when Carl slid from the damp-smelling sheets, dressed silently in the corner, then hurried outdoors. Puddles glinted like knifeblades. A pained, hollow feeling grew within him as if a tremendous bubble were trapped in

his chest and slowly expanded. He could barely catch his breath. Just off the curb lounged an old woman, her stretch pants pulled taut around her belly and into the lips of her crotch. Clean black shadows cut the streets into oblongs of light and dark. Carl cupped one hand over his eyes and clasped his briefcase with the other.

At last, and with a long sigh of relief, the deep undeliberate sigh of someone who has escaped a threat, safe after all, Carl climbed the wide granite steps and disappeared into the library.

## II.

The aroma of brewed coffee spread throughout the apartment. Liz, her kimono open, slapped the French toast with her spatula, then flipped it over amidst a flurry of sputters, humming peacefully, wiping tiny splats of grease from her bare chest. She squeezed a fresh orange for Carl, sucked her moist fingers one by one, then checked the coffee again.

Carl sat at his writing desk, his small fingers pressed into his shaggy, rust-colored hair.

It was at a loud party. Liz sat alone in a kitchen. A half glass of Scotch shimmered by her elbow while she cracked walnuts and piled the shells in a pyramid before her. When Carl entered and closed the door behind him, the outside din hushed to a murmur, like the sound of water washing up in a cave. He had slipped there to escape. When he turned, he saw Liz; her blouse, deeply unbuttoned, exposed rich, brown skin. He said nothing; leaned his back against the door and merely watched, staring helplessly until she looked up at him, then offered him her drink. He blurted:

"Come home with me."

She did. One morning, as they lay in bed, she said, "Life is like the Panama Canal." When he gave a burst of laughter, she rolled on top of him and held her head so that her dark hair brushed his face, dangled in his mouth, became moist with his saliva.

Liz flipped the French toast onto a plate, then padded barefoot over to Carl and lay her hand lightly on his shoulder. He did not look up. Patiently, she waited, massaging his boyish shoulders with tender pinches. Her expression was soft and indefinite. Finally, she whispered in his ear:

"Come eat with me. Let's not go out today. I poured your coffee already."

Carl brushed her off. "Shhh! Not now; not now."

"But your . . ."

"Shhh! dammit, not now; not now."



Carl flipped through his translation,\* always excited by the almost immediate irony in which young Hans says cheerfully:

*How glad I am to have gotten away!*

Or the way young Hans reaches out toward the moon after his meeting with the irascible Lady M— and shouts effusively:

*Never have I sat in such an enchanted garden!*

Later, Hans writes of the same garden:

*The shadowy path, lined by beechtrees and tall, prickly shrubs, ends in a dark enclosure, sad with the aura of loneliness . . .*

Carl pushed a stick of gum into his mouth and then slowly massaged his temples until the tension drained out of him. A tremendous red sunset burned out the western sky in the painting on the wall above him. Stacks of reference books, like paper walls, hived him in a niche, where his work was spread around him in a semi-circle. Things had not been going well.

A librarian with plucked eyebrows and a high, shiny forehead, beamed a twisted smile at him while she sorted books. As she bent lower from the waist, her skirt slid upward on her splayed legs. Steel blue panties locked her thighs together. Embarrassed, Carl tried to think of Hans. The air smelled of stale books, unused, putrescent; he must get outside.

A long narrow cloud glowed red across the evening sky like a scar. The ground was dark with dull shadows. Warm air flapped like a carpet hung on a clothesline and swirled the slight fragrance of ivy and geraniums around Carl as he sat in Bryant Park beneath an arcade of lush green trees. His bench felt hard beneath him; his briefcase lay across his lap. "Pleasant out here. Nice to get away," Carl thought, and casually drummed on the metal clasp of his briefcase. He yawned deeply.

At that moment, when the water cleared from his eyes, he noticed the woman for the first time; she had been sitting there all along, but now, inexplicably, she had come to life for him and he could see nothing else. Her gray streaked hair was pulled back in a tight chignon; bare, white-skinned arms, long and slender, folded in her lap where a metal case, grasped tightly, glistened in her hands. Discreetly, she pushed back a lock of hair blown loose in the breeze, then slipped her hand back to her lap with a graceful movement. There were dark rings around her deep black eyes.

\**Leiden und Freude*, Ernst Hoffman, 1774 (originally published: *Weltanschauung*). Carl's idea was to translate and render it in the present tense. "The immortal present," he called it, "where an action never dies, but *is* and reverberates for all eternity, what a place!"

She rose and approached him.

"I would like a light," she said, sitting on the edge of his bench, holding her face toward his. Her voice was melodious, almost sing-song with affected diction of an elderly actress.

"Sure," Carl said, trying to act composed. Her words had stolen his breath. His entire hand groped inside his baggy pants pocket.

She looked directly into his face, but through it at the same time.

"If your hand would stop trembling I'll light this," she said. Her sweet perfume aroused him.

"It's just you startled me," he said, then wished he hadn't. He asked shyly, "Sit here often?"

"I'm waiting. For someone . . ."

She looked toward the street with a sidelong glance. Her face now seemed distracted; impatient. She held her cigarette between two erect fingers, but did not smoke it. Her hand nervously pushed back that lock of hair which had blown free again, then slid to the bench beside her where it stopped, her elbow straight; she seemed held there only by some secret determination.

As her lips moved to speak again, a limousine pulled to the curb opposite them, blasting its horn. She jumped up touching her hand to his knee, and said quickly, "Be good."

Carl studied her through the park's iron grating until she disappeared into the blackness of the car's back seat.

The horizontal slats of the bench pressed into his back again and he shifted his weight. It was then he noticed her silver cigarette case; he sniffed it, inhaling that sweet smell of lime perfume, and as he ran his finger over the case, as if to buff the livid sky reflected in it like a luminescent puddle, it sprang open into his lap, empty, except for her name embossed on the cloth lining.

When he rose, spitting out the gum he had kept tucked in one cheek, and walked toward home, a new energy pulsed through him, a momentary feeling of flight, and he clutched his briefcase vigorously while the transparent evening dissipated into hot, city night.

### III.

He turned off into a dark neighborhood where large, foreign cars lined both sides of the streets. A taxi discharged two couples to a doorman, as imperturbable as his building, then hurtled into the night.

Carl imagined himself a trapeze artist floating nimbly above a dark void, his every step precise, calculated; a Houdini escaping the



tightest traps without mussing his hair; an . . . Overhead, a blueberry-colored sky expanded limitlessly; small dim clouds fled before a high turbulent wind. He walked quickly, excited by curiosity, the palms of his doll-like hands moist, and by a touch of revenge. Down the block, a sombre canopy jutted to the curb.

Carefully, Carl pressed a buzzer. The pug-faced doorman, his hands clasped smugly behind his back, stood beside a fountain in which an alabaster figure poured a stream of water from a tiny white jug, and eyed Carl suspiciously through the glass partition.

"Who is it?"

"Carl."

"Who?"

"I have your cigarette case."

"Oh . . . bring it up."

There was a loud, strident buzz.

She was wearing a plain housedress when she met him in the hallway, her hand extended in an eloquent gesture with which she brought him inside, touching his elbow. A grand piano, majestic and detached, loomed in the center of her living room, with a silk manilla shawl spread over it. There was a darkwood mantel over an unlit fireplace, and on it was a pair of bronzed toddlers. In the corner stood a barren clotheshorse. The scent of lime was everywhere; pleasant, relaxing.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you," Carl offered.

"Nonsense. Here, sit. Sit. I just couldn't imagine where I left it. Can I bring you a drink? Some cold wine, yes? Good." Her eyes shone fiercely as she moved about.

"By the way," she called from the kitchen, "please, call me 'Maggie'."

Carl had sunk into her plush sofa with the meekness of someone unable to determine his own actions. He noticed his shirt was buttoned in the wrong holes, but left it. He watched her return to the room tugging on a corkscrew until it popped. "Oh that's fine," Carl said, but then sank back into her sofa. Folds of her dress bunched around her thighs as she stacked several records on a turntable; she caught eyes with him for a moment, but turned away to look through more records.

She bent over him, folded down the one side of his collar that had been standing up, then sat beside him.

"Tell me something about you," she said.

Carl made a few guarded remarks, but later, when he said, "I see you like magazines," nodding toward the stacks in one corner, she seemed to turn on him with impatience.

"I collect them. There's a difference," she said reproachfully, but then immediately stopped herself and laughed expediently, as if excusing a private joke, acting warm and supple again with her knee touching his as she sat angled toward him, and laughed again amusedly, tossing her head back slightly.

He was aware of the slender neck exposed to him. He reached for it; no, he could not. He cupped his hand deliberately and coughed. He felt a crippling timidity; a sort of terror.

"What? Yeah . . . oh that's fine," he said and tipped the wineglass immediately to his mouth.

Maggie talked aimlessly, her voice dancing with its sing-song quality, while over and over, she refilled their glasses and each time pushed the bottle back into the slush the ice had become. Carl lit a cigarette, then lit another from it. For some reason he began to think of Hans, how he had sat childlike before Lady M—, who had been coy and distant, a silk handkerchief first in one hand, then in her other, her every movement discreet and graceful. And Hans. Defying the squat fist of fate; the stand of heroes! The heavy drapes quivered from a sultry breeze. Another record plopped down.

"A toast," Carl blurted suddenly. His exuberance gushed without context and hung awkwardly in the air. "I shall make one! To this music, my favorite. Entzückend!"

He raised his glass so enthusiastically wine splashed onto his mouth and ran down his chin in thin streamers. He clinked his glass onto the coffee table, huffed his soft cheeks and sank back into a cushion of the sofa, exhausted.

Maggie studied him with an odd, distant expression. She touched his hair; a delicate, curious stroke. With a slender finger she wiped wine from his chin in a motherly way. Carl was lying in a meadow with tall grass swaying over him, the thick loam breathing beneath his horizontal body, moist air heavy on his skin; the smell of lime, of beech. She smiled down into his pale mute face with an ethereal gaze and then, in one of those moments on the point of delirium and ecstasy, she pressed his hand to her small round breast—and he saw himself convulse with delight . . .

#### IV.

To escape the pandemonium he began to feel, Carl plunged into his work.

*. . . I cannot imagine the consequences. If I have told you before of women for whom I would die, then now I have found one for whom I would live. Yet, I am torn. I cannot forget that recent gathering at which her friends . . . but I have*



*written you already about that. You see, I am helpless. At times, my hopes seem insincere. Oh, my friend, would that I may step outside this fragile form . . .*

One morning toward the end of summer, Carl stayed in bed. He sat with a book unopened on his lap, his back against the wall, the single sheet tucked around his waist. The air was hot and thick. Flecks of light jostled over the bed, disappeared suddenly, then reappeared. Bathwater droned in the other room, from which seeped the sweet smell of soap. Carl thought of Maggie, of her long, graceful arms, and decided it was time for a talk with Liz.

"Can never find a goddamn thing," Liz muttered as she rifled the cabinet. She slammed the door shut impatiently two or three times. Each time, it sprang open again. She stood amphora-like, hands on her hips, and looked about the room. Her unbrushed hair, which she had recently cut, rippled in wild tufts. At last she found her roll of amber paper, but then she lingered, as if all along she'd known she wasn't really looking for the paper, and eyed Carl for a moment thoughtfully. She tossed the paper up and down, sauntered to the bed and sat beside him. Her lips were slightly pursed; playfully, she slipped her hand beneath the sheet.

"This afternoon, let's walk in the park. And we'll spend all evening together. I quit my job, y'know."

"Ummm," Carl said absently.

She walked two fingers up his leg igglety pigglety.

"And in two weeks, we're visiting my friends. In the mountains. I wrote soon as I knew. It's all settled."

Carl stared at his exposed gangly feet. The book slid from his lap while he fumbled with his thoughts.

"Just think, escape this hole awhile. Cold nights. Lots of old army blankets to snuggle under." She withdrew her hand. "But we'll have to quit smoking."

She waited for his reaction.

"Carl, damn you, you're not even listening."

He raised his leg that had fallen asleep and rubbed his knee. "All right. Liz, listen . . ."

"No, now you listen."

The sheet bunched in wavelets as she slid closer. Her face grew sober. She looped her hands tenderly around his knee, then spoke slowly. "We're going to have a baby."

Carl's back peeled from the wall like adhesive tape. He glanced at her flat stomach, then over her shoulder. What a magnificent sight the white light filtering through the blinds! He. A father! Suddenly the whole world filled with meaning. He understood the scratched and



uneven mahogany highboy standing across from him with its old mournful air, and he understood why cigarettes had burned the arms of the heavy wingchair, and a smile started at the corners of his mouth, stopped like the first lurch of a train, then began again, raced across his face, hot and flushed, and echoed throughout his body and in that moment, all of which passed before he pulled her over and began rubbing his hand around and around on her tawny stomach, from the dissatisfaction and confusion of his life, there precipitated order: one, simple, illuminating, eternal order. He bit her neck and Liz, laughing, lashed the air with her feet until she screamed abruptly, then dashed to the bathroom. The drone of running water ceased with a clanging of pipes, but in the next instant Carl was vaulting into the tub, flames of water splashing out around him. Carefully, Liz followed. And Carl, pink and radiant, began rubbing her belly again, like Aladdin with his lamp . . .

An autumn sunset glowed from behind a high-rise while Carl passed through a deserted courtyard.

In the wholesale meat district, greenhead flies buzzed over blood and grease caked between cobblestones. The old El, gray and dispirited, crossed between city and sky like a heavy, squalid fence beyond which a tugboat sounded, long and deep like a moan. Occasionally, a drop of water fell from the unused tracks and resounded from the awaiting puddle, brown with rust.

He continued walking, both hands buried deep in his pockets. He thought of the silk manilla shawl and how once he had picked out a tune with a single finger while Maggie had stepped out for a moment. He emerged from the corridor formed between housing projects and crossed the small circle of grass, a brown color in the sinking light.

A beautiful girl stepped from a red MG. He followed her for a short distance until she turned off into a doorway.

There's just no way, he thought. It'd be pointless to even go there; he had responsibilities now. He would just feel awkward.

Neighborhood men in bleached T-shirts intervened when a grown man backed a young girl against a wall in a subdued struggle. Carl passed the fringe of the commotion. The man turned out to be the girl's father. The fresh smell of pastries drifted from a bakery while from a half-open window, music played, old and scratchy.

Once, she had leaned her face against the window, her long white arms held high over her head, her bare flesh pressed flush against the pane. the nighttime city spread before her while the blinking red light from a police car parked below laved her frail body like a statue in an amusement park. She had said:

"It's odd how long ago that seems now. Pity. And every day the world dies a tiny bit." When she turned to Carl, her eyes focused on

some point only she could see and she mumbled something unintelligible. The room seemed dark with an aura of loneliness. For a moment, Carl had not known who they were.

In the distance, an ambulance screamed; it flared closer then passed and died away. Human forms lay like shadows on the hard concrete floor of the corner playground; it hurts to be misunderstood every second of your life. The sun dropped over the mauve horizon. Somewhere, music played from a transistor radio, distorted and tinny.

What could he even say, he thought. He really didn't mean to be mean? Two rows of parked cars lined the street like a set of unending hyphens. In Washington Square, tourists frenetically clicked Instamatic pictures while confabs of seedy men bent over concrete chess tables. Transients sang and clapped unconcernedly on the stone coping around the dry fountain and panhandlers leaned against art nouveau lampposts. Litter lay scattered all about with the same despair as confetti the morning after a party.

Carl raised his collar against the opaque night, which had become chilly with the quiet scents of autumn, and turned toward home.

## V.

Without transition, as if some magician had performed a trick, the long winter bloomed into spring; large black puddles dried into dust while a bright disc of sun straddled the city. Pointed red buds appeared on park trees and thrashed toward life in the warm, gusty breezes.

Inside, Carl huddled over papers arranged neatly before him, his head cocked on one hand, his slender legs crossed beneath his desk. His translation was nearing completion.

*It has not been used in years, but there is still the smell of sulfur, and of potash. It is heavy in his hand. Peering through his window, Hans contemplates the white moon, dull against the deep black sky. "... soon. Yes, very soon..." He taps the cold barrel against his pale cheek while imagining himself growing larger until the valley seems to recede beneath him, as under one who has been climbing, and the white huts seem like stones. There is a field beyond the ledge. But he is not yet ready.*

Quickly, Carl rinsed two potatoes left on the drain, then thrust them into the oven. "Exactly 400; everything's under control," he said aloud, not doubting himself for an instant. "Plenty of time." He deftly juggled more than he should have carried and sang in a mock-raspy voice while he peeled carrots and chopped onions:



“ . . . don’t want no room at the Biltmore  
Ain’t got no carpet on my floor  
Said don’t need no carpet on my floor . . . ”

Occasionally, as he scuffled about, it struck him his feet seemed childlike in the purple slippers that Liz had knitted for him, but he did not dwell on it. From the copper kettle, he measured a small amount of steaming water to dissolve gelatin for a dessert. “She’d better not be late,” he said while he stirred it.

The windows fogged gray against the darkening evening. Calmly, with his legs tucked beneath him, he slouched in the heavy wing-chair, which he had pushed to one spot, the hassock to another until everything fit some imagined order. The smell of baked potatoes wafted in the air. He closed his eyes restfully and tried to imagine Liz’s movements through the streets, creating every step. Three times she reached the door. “It’s getting late,” he thought, and each time moved her back to a different beginning. He began quickening her pace through streets that had grown colder and darker until there was something frantic about her movements. On some blocks he lost sight of her completely, only to catch her again on other blocks moving jerkily past dark buildings and dead alleys palled by thick shadows where he imagined ruthless men lurking beside garbage bins. Carl lit the burner beneath a pot of fresh broccoli. “Plenty of time,” he said. The oven had made the air hot and unbreathable. Carl’s fingers groped for the catch, until at last, he flung open the window. Fresh, cold air rushed in against him as if he had broken a vacuum. In the distance a car screeched; the hollow sound echoed through the narrow street until a loud blast of horn pierced the emptiness like a skewer.

And then finally he spied Liz’s heavy form trundling flat-footed up the walk. “Hurry!” he yelled down to her breathlessly. “Hurry up!” He slammed shut the window, which had unfogged, and anxiously lit the candle he had centered on the table, his shadow dancing tall across the wall and ceiling in a flickering circle of light. “Perfect timing,” he gloated, his eyes bright with the burning candle.

Liz tossed him her bulky cardigan as she lumbered to the table. And she laughed, “Those pigeons can all go to hell.”

“Well, how’d it go today?” he called from the closet, standing on a stool, folding her sweater away.

He poked his head out and waited for her answer, a lick of yellow light gleaming in his eyes.

VI.

The sun sank in a red blaze.

What a glorious day! Noonday sunlight streamed between skyscrapers and glinted off black plate glass while the streets swelled with the colorful paraders, loud and ingenuous, who merged and noisily forced themselves up the wide avenue, past knots of waving bystanders. Spirits soared; all things were possible. And that boy. When he pressed his face against the cab's half-open window, Liz squeezed Carl's hand, which she'd already clasped on the small suitcase perched before her tremendous stomach, and laughed toward Carl, her other hand to her face.

The evening shadows grew longer and broader. Proudly, Carl skipped down the smooth marble steps. They had sent him home, patting him on the back as if he were a hero, telling him not to worry. As he walked through the streets, silhouetted by the diminishing light, Carl seemed larger than he actually was. His steps were light-hearted and even, and their rhythmic beat echoed through the almost empty streets. A solitary laugh sprang from a dark stoop and its sound lingered in the air until Carl's steady pace again sounded through it.

He was drunk with himself; when he passed an old man, who scooped confetti into a pail with slow, pained movements, Carl blurted in a loud voice, "Have a cigar, friend!" and continued his walk into the night, stride unbroken, his shoulders tall and squared.

Later, Carl stood on his rooftop where the brisk, fluid night gently sucked at his clothes which flapped, quietly, like flags. He gazed down on the dark streets, his streets, where couples strolled or paused while yellow headlights streaked past. At that moment, all was his; inviolate; determined. He breathed the black air deeply, filling his lungs until they were ready to burst, then triumphantly went down to sleep, full of dreams of Liz, and of strength.

Sometime during the night, Liz's baby kicked her stomach once, unbreeched itself and strangled in its cord. Several days passed; Liz came home.

After dinner, he pulled on his slippers. The floor had felt cold and damp.

When he crossed the room, he was uninvolved with his actions, like a somnambulist, moving with a weary resignation. He leaned over his writing desk, his face half-illuminated by his single lamp, but he could not make himself lift the pen. There was a hulking silence. Liz sat propped in bed, watching nothing in particular, occasionally biting a fingernail, as if waiting; impatient. Carl's luminous shadow spread throughout the room. Later, when he clicked off the lamp, he remained by his desk, motionless in the dark, listening



to the hum of an electric clock, and to the sporadic 'ping' as water dripped from the faucet into accumulating water. The room seemed vast. So this is what I have come to, he thought. Finally, he climbed into bed beside Liz, who had already fallen asleep.

When he awoke next morning, he sprang up suddenly. For some reason he felt energetic. Today he would do things! Liz lay in bed, eyes open, unspeaking. Excited, he rose, pulled on his slippers and paced about the apartment.

"You getting up today?" he asked her, scooping dirty dishes from the table and piling them into the sink. He looked at objects, noticing one then another with sharp jerks of his head, as if he had just moved in. Liz turned over restlessly and yanked the sheet, but said nothing. Carl threw cold water on his face, then, with soapy beads still dripping from his chin, set about repairing the blinds: closed, a soft dusk palled the room; open, shafts of light tore across the bed and burned into the wall.

"Goddammit! Must you do that," Liz said.

"I thought I'd . . ."

"Well don't!"

Disgusted, she rose from the bed, her cotton nightgown moist and clinging, and threw herself into the stuffed chair, slamming her feet down on the hassock.

For a moment he was confused and hurt. He wanted to tear the purple slippers from his feet, which he thought gawky and ludicrous. Instead, he began to wash dishes. There was a deep hollow sound when water gushed into the large aluminum pot.

"Damn you, why don't you go to the store!" she said. She threw her unlit cigarette on the floor, looked up at the ceiling, then down at her nails. "I can't stand you puttering around. Always puttering. Always!"

When her fingers fumbled too long for the last cigarette, she crumpled the pack and flung it at his desk.

He walked out.

Down front, the red tip of an usher's flashlight glowed through the darkness like a hot coal. Suddenly, there were shots; a loud shot. They fired out of context; Carl's thoughts had drifted toward Hans, toward his lush garden; toward his simple cottage; Hans, whose existence was enormous. A sun waxed warm and deep. His hand reached toward a white moon that seemed dull in an implacable sky. Someone laughed shrilly. He must finish his work. Another shot pierced the darkness; a silver sharkskin suit slumped beneath a boardwalk while surf thundered onto an intensely white beach. There was a murmur of laughter. "I'll finish it once and for all . . ."

When Carl left the theater, nighttime had fallen; he did not expect

it, and felt uneasy. The black sky was empty and expressionless; his steps were fast, but uneven.

When he huffed onto his landing, he froze. At the end of his long hallway, a narrow rectangle of light glowed from his doorway.

In the next moment, he was pushing past the door. The room leapt at him. Two or three slats had been ripped from the blinds and dangled on one side from the ribbon. The heavy chair lay overturned; drawers hung open with clothes spilling over the sides. And there—off to the side—lay his briefcase, twisted and listless like a dead animal. For an instant, his heart stopped, then pounded again so violently that his head throbbed. A heavy pressure clamped around his chest and he could not catch his breath. Either he ran madly about the room, or he walked directly into the bathroom where he found the last two soggy scraps of manuscript still floating in the toilet.

He re-entered the apartment. Liz slouched in the wing chair wearing her pernicious smile, holding a cup of hot tea that scorched the air above it. No; he returned to the other room.

And then something odd happened. He felt a strange buoyancy; a sort of exhilaration.

He raced into the streets. Turkish music with piercing clarinets skirled from a doorway that smelled of whisky and broiled meat. Beneath a blinking movie marquee, florid faces with spangled eyes were taped to the wall. A bald man with a dome of a head peered into a pink-lit topless bar. Boldly, Carl pushed him aside.

He ran on, unaware of his breath, which came in spurts. He turned off into a dark, silent neighborhood. And then, he was scooting through a closing door. An alabaster woman, whose toga clung delicately around her hips, poured a thin trickle of water into a blue, tranquil pond. He did not hear the doorman who was yelling after him. Calmly, he climbed the stairs, his steps echoing down the narrow stairwell, then stood with his finger pressed against the bell.

The door opened a crack. A woman's face peeked out cautiously. Her worn, lusterless eyes showed no surprise as she continued to stare.

"You look terrible," she said at last, in a wispish, sinking voice. "Come in."

Warily, she held open the door. He watched her face, thinking, "Her lips are moist and thick and red . . ."

Inside was warm. A fragrant breeze rustled the fringe of the silk shawl on the piano. The furniture, which seemed close and plush in the semi-light, formed a path to the open window, beside which was an upholstered rocker.

Maggie leaned against the divider and held her frail arms about herself. She clutched a tissue in one hand. "Well . . . what do you want?"



He brushed past her and sat in the rocker. Silently, he peered through the window at a flat, white moon and began to rock slowly back and forth. The chair creaked quietly and gave him a gentle and unassuming air. His muscles, which had been tense all this time, relaxed, and he felt a sudden rush of warmth.

Maggie rubbed the fingers of one hand against her cracked lips and then pensively traced a line in her cheek. "You're shivering," she said, but made no movement toward him.

"I'm glad to have gotten away," he said. His breath came to him easily now. There was a soothing breeze as he leaned his forearms on the windowsill and looked into the night. He felt contented, as if the entire world had become a motionless pond over which he stood and gazed.

There was a long silence.

Finally, Maggie asked in a voice that seemed confused and slightly afraid, "Away from what?"

But he did not hear her; he imagined himself rising, rising and growing full of strength, and when he saw the iridescent glow of a distant streetlamp, he rose and stared intently at its tremulous circle of light until it seemed to recede into a long, dark void. He shivered. Maggie's mouth contorted into a single, terrified O, but he was only vaguely aware of her as he leaned deeply out the window, an unnaturally tranquil expression on his face, and imagined himself climbing onto that high, contoured meadow, dusting himself off as if brushing the dark pall from his life, the constellations close and bright, the white huts like pebbles far below.